

# Woolf and mcewan: how the modern became postmodern



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Ian McEwan's *Atonement* draws inspiration from and alludes to a vast number of 20th century modernist authors and works, both stylistically and thematically. For a novel to be considered a successful culmination to the reading of a large body of works, however, it must not be content with merely echoing the themes, styles, and forms of the past. Rather, it must extend them, add to them creatively, and attempt to pull them into contemporary readership.

While his thematic and stylistic allusions to 20th century greats such as Virginia Woolf show his intellectual knowledge of and debt to 20th century modernist writing, it is McEwan's ability to transform these stylistic and thematic elements and mold them into a postmodern classic that makes *Atonement* a more than adequate culmination to the readings of a 20th century British Literature course. Stylistically, McEwan draws most heavily from the works of Virginia Woolf for the opening portion of *Atonement*.

The slow pace of the opening, allowing for the painstakingly detailed description of nearly every scene, in addition to the examination of the psychological motives of multiple main characters, closely mirrors the style of Virginia Woolf, which she incorporates into the majority of her works. To quote a characteristically slow paced, though psychologically enriched, passage from the opening of Woolf's *Between the Acts*, "Mrs. Manresa bubbled up, enjoying her own capacity to surmount, without turning a hair, this minor social crisis—this laying on of two more plates.

For had she not complete faith in flesh and blood? and aren't we all flesh and blood? and how silly to make bones of trifles when we're all flesh and blood under the skin" (Woolf 39). The passage, to one unfamiliar with the <https://assignbuster.com/woolf-and-mcewan-how-the-modern-became-postmodern/>

stylistically innovative style of Woolf, seems to meander under the weight of an overly descriptive narrative and, more prominently, under the psychological musings of a character that, until a few pages previous, was nonexistent to the reader. The majority of *Between the Acts* contains passages of a similar style, of which this is only one randomly chosen example.

As is true of many of the passages that can be found in any Woolfian novel, advancing the storyline is secondary to fleshing out the motives, thoughts, and feelings of the characters. With the plot safely set behind in-depth psychological examination in rank of importance, Woolf is free to experiment with a stream-of-consciousness style narrative in which psychological elements of the story feature more prominently than physical elements. In addition to the stream-of-consciousness for which she is well known, there are other characteristics common to much of Woolf's work.

For example, she has the tendency to describe a scene, more often than not, a natural scene, in painstaking detail, reluctant to add action that would too quickly further the narrative. Another passage from *Between the Acts* provides an adequate example of this, reading, " Here came the sun—an illimitable rapture of joy, embracing every flower, every leaf. Then in compassion it withdrew, covering its face, as if it forebore to look on human suffering. There was a fecklessness, a lack of symmetry and order in the clouds as they thinned and thickened.

Was it their law, or no law they obeyed? " (Woolf 23). This description of nature essentially is of no consequence to the narrative yet the full passage describing the weather proceeds for almost a full page. The flowing,  
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exceptionally detailed descriptions coinciding with an apparently lacking story line and an in-depth psychological view that the reader is privy to as a result of the stream-of-consciousness style, are all aspects of Woolfian literature that McEwan attempts to draw from and mold to his own postmodernist designs.

While McEwan draws inspiration from Woolf in a way that would be just as simple for an author of less talent to do, his aims are far deeper reaching than an author who simply wishes to garner a comparison to Virginia Woolf. McEwan does borrow quite clearly from the stylings of Woolf, even commenting it upon it himself, writing, “ we wondered if it owed a little too much to the techniques of Mrs. Woolf” (McEwan 294). Rather than be content with merely keeping her modernist conventions intact, however, he completely alters their meaning within the context of his own novel.

In the opening portions of *Atonement*, for example, McEwan, in quite a similar way as Woolf, attempts to gain entry to the psychological depths of his characters. With the exception of a few broad passages required to move the story forward through dialogue or action, the majority of the opening is devoted to the internal monologues of the characters and an examination of their needs, desires, and feelings. This is clearly defined in the earliest pages as the novel provides passages such as, “ She wanted to leave, she wanted to lie alone, facedown on her bed and savor the vile piquancy of the moment, and go back down the lines of branching consequence to the point before the destruction began” (McEwan 14). This passage, one of many in a similar style throughout *Atonement*, attempts, in a stream-of-consciousness in the classic Woolfian sense, to examine the inner psyche of the character rather

than force any sort physical, tangible action to occur. In this way, the story's narrative may seem slow paced while the characters' motives become more well known to the reader.

This borrowing stylistically from Woolf is not necessarily important or groundbreaking, and is certainly no deciding factor in whether this novel should be viewed as a classic in coming decades. There have been many authors who have devoted the entirety of their works to the stream-of-consciousness fiction that Woolf helped to pioneer. As mentioned above, what makes McEwan an author deserving of longevity in his works is that the allusions are not merely presented, but are completely altered from their original meaning by the context of *Atonement*.

He takes deeply alluded to modernist conventions and makes them Briony's primary source of inspiration, seen most clearly when she ponders the new school of authors and realizes, " She no longer really believed in characters. They were quaint devices that belonged to the nineteenth century...Plots too were like rusted machinery whose wheels would no longer turn...It was thought, perception, and sensations that interested her, the conscious mind and how to represent its onward roll" (McEwan 265).

There is a certain depth and complexity in the fact that McEwan represents these modernist conventions not as his own, but as those of a thirteen year old girl, the central character of his metanarrative. What McEwan does next with these modernist principles of writing is attempt to show that they too are vestiges of the past, doomed to fall in the face of a more ethical and moral fiction. Just as Briony rejects the realism of the authors of the

nineteenth century, McEwan is rejecting the modernism of the 20th century in favor of a postmodernism.

One of Briony's internal monologues to which the reader is privy, begins, "The interminable pages about light and stone and water, a narrative split between three points of view, the hovering stillness of nothing much seeming to happen—none of this could conceal her cowardice" (McEwan 302). These characteristics, all of which have been shown to influence Woolfian literature, have all failed Briony's attempt to hide what she knows she has done.

The monologue continues in a similar vein with, "Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream—three streams! —of consciousness?" (McEwan 302). Her guilt and the moral and ethical implications of what she has done cannot be fixed through some outdated ideas of modernist fiction, which has no ethical consequences. There are allusions from dozens of modernists authors sprinkled throughout the length of *Atonement*. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper can give only one of the most prominent.

In a similar fashion as with the Woolf example, however, McEwan nearly always thoughtfully engages the text to which he is alluding, but is not content to merely allow these allusions to sit idly in the novel with no sense of purpose. Rather, each of his numerous allusions has some greater purpose in *Atonement* as McEwan artfully transforms them into something that fits the overall scope of what he attempts to accomplish. Still, the question remains whether or not this book is an adequate culmination of all the readings in a 20th century British literature course.

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The fact that *Atonement* not only draws from modernist writers, many of whom are the focus of the aforementioned course, but attempts to extend them creatively and transform them from the 20th century modern to the 21st century postmodern makes *Atonement* an excellent novel and a fine culmination of a semester of 20th century British literature. Works Cited  
McEwan, Ian. *Atonement*. New York: Anchor Books, 2001. Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. New York: Harcourt, 2001.